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Sarah Greenough, Sarah Kennel (eds.), *Sally Mann – A Thousand Crossings*

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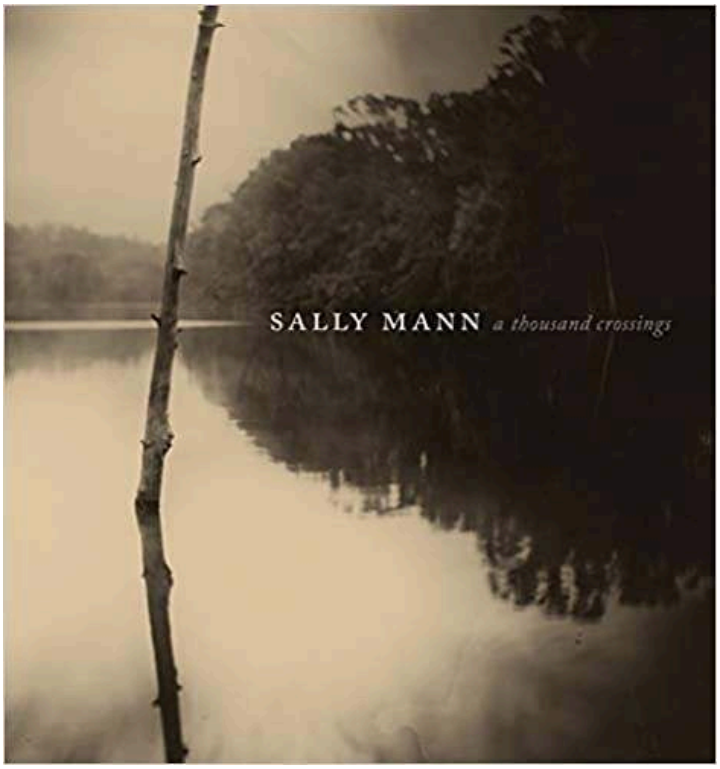
RÉFÉRENCE

Sarah Greenough, Sarah Kennel (eds.), *Sally Mann – A Thousand Crossings* (New York, Abrams; Washington, National Gallery of Art, 2018), 331 p, ISBN 978-1-4197-2903-4



1 The exhibition *Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings* was the first major survey of this prominent artist—dubbed America's "Best Photographer" by *Time* magazine in 2001—to travel in the United States and France. Since the Corcoran Gallery of Art was placed under its stewardship, the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC acquired 25 photographs by Mann, making it one of the largest repositories of her photos in the country. The exhibition was on view at the National Gallery of Art from March 4 through May 28, 2018, and then toured the country in four other venues, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem (June-Sept.2018), then at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (Nov-Feb 2019), the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (March-May 2019), the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (Oct-Jan 2020), and also traveled outside the USA at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, France (June-Sept 2019)—where US photography is often showcased.

2 This monographic catalog, richly illustrated with more than 100 photos, including several previously unpublished ones, testifies to the scope of Mann's art and vision. This catalog, whose title comes from John Glenday's poem "Landscape with Flying Man" (2009), is the first comprehensive one to document Sally Mann's art.[1] The authors include, among others, the curators of the exhibition: Sarah Greenough (senior curator and head of the department of photographs at the National Gallery of Art) and Sarah Kennel (formerly The Byrne Family curator of photography at the Peabody Essex Museum and now curator of photography at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta).

3 The first chapter, by Sarah Greenough, gives a broad and engaging overview of Sally Mann's art, in a broadly sweeping manner that never falls into superficiality, even if it may seem at times a little fragmented. The following chapters zoom in on various aspects of Mann's work. An aspect that Greenough specifically addresses is Mann's great interest in literature, from her early age as an avid reader to a BA and MA in creative writing in 1975 from Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia. Parallel to her studies,

Mann learned photography at her boarding school in 1969 and in workshops (less expensive than art schools), including one conducted by Ansel Adams and an assistant of his, Ted Orland, whom she claimed was one of her mentors. In 1973, she discovered 7500 19th-century glass negatives by Michael Miley, which she catalogued and reprinted, and from whom she later drew inspiration. Another eye-opening photographer for Mann was Nancy Rexroth with her Diana camera.

4 Mann reconciled writing and photography with *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (2015), an award-winning memoir of "silver poems of tone and undertow" that evoke literature read in her teenage years. Her pictures in general have the immersive intensity and ambiguous sweep of a story. In *Second Sight* (1983), she prefaced her platinum prints with poems, as had done photographers of the 1960s or 1970s (Robert Frank, Duane Michals, Jim Goldberg, or even Vito Acconci, Barbara Kruger or Sophie Calle). Another significant artist of her life was painter, sculptor and photographer Cy Twombly, who also mixed the visual and the verbal.

5 Greenough then recounts Mann's life story, "Spinning a story of what it is to grow up, without fear and without shame" (Mann). Born May 1st, 1951 in Lexington, Mann lived there almost her whole life. In this small town, renowned for its alluring landscape and rich history, Mann was raised in a household that cared little for children, with highbrow parents who were outsiders and eccentrics in this small, close-knit town. However, she was nurtured by the defining and beloved presence of an African American woman, Gee Gee (Virginia "Gee-Gee" Carter), who worked for the family for 50 years and who was a custodian parent or even a surrogate mother for Mann.

6 Mann's controversial pictures are further developed in the next chapter. *At Twelve* (1988) is a collection of photographs of 12-year olds on the cusp of adulthood, staring unblinkingly at the viewer with a sense of self-knowledge. Blindsided and then maybe chastened by the more significant controversy of *Immediate Family* (1992)[2], Mann turned away from photographing her family to record the dark elegiac landscape that surrounded it. Her family "receded into the landscape", as if grieving the loss of her children's youth. When Mann received the 'Picturing the South' Commission for the High Museum of Arts, she explored the Georgian landscape as "a silent witness to another age", fraught with troubled history. She then traveled to Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi in a state of grace, seeking the earth "to give up its ghosts" in the "flawed heart of the country" in a Conradian fashion, and her journey led to her publication, *Deep South* (2005). A number of pictures are in homage to Emmett Till, after whom she named her son. These humdrum and nondescript places laden with historical pain were, in her own words, "teasingly slow to give their secrets".

7 Mann inherited her father's fascination with death, especially after his own death in 1988 and Gee-Gee's in 1994 (aged 100). She developed an interest in what mattered to the dying person, before turning to corpses. After exhuming her beloved Greyhound, Eva, Mann photographed the corpses donated to the University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center, otherwise known as the Body Farm, and studied the way in which human flesh decomposed under various conditions. *What Remains* (2003) depicts poignant but macabre pictures of decaying corpses and putrid flesh, both distanced and aestheticized. It also eerily includes close-up portraits of Mann's grown children, calling to mind Victorian post-mortem portraits of children. Larry, her husband, was diagnosed in the 1980s with muscular dystrophy, a degenerative and devastating illness. As a counterpoint to male artists photographing their beautiful muses, she

photographed his weakened body in *Proud flesh* (2009), a testimony of their mutual trust and steadfast love, and another meditation on time's forward march, as testified by the accompanying quotes from TS Eliot (*Four Quartets*, 1936-42), Eudora Welty (*The Ponder Heart*, 1953), and this memorable one from Nabokov: "Our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness", *Speak, Memory*, 1951.

8 When a sex offender fled onto Mann's farm and was fatally wounded during a shootout with the police, she turned her attention no longer to what nature did to a dead body, but to what a dead body did to the earth, how the land "bore witness" and "remembered". In a series of ominous penumbra-toned photos of Civil War battlefields made between 2001 and 2003, she tried to capture the pervasive energy that permeates a site festering with historical suffering. Faulkner's books, especially *Absalom*, opened her eyes to the "rivers of blood, tears, sweat that African-Americans poured into the dark soil of their thankless new home", and to the refusal of the cursed South to own up to the horrors of slavery. Between 2006 and 2015, she made tintypes in the Great Dismal Swamp—where many fugitive slaves converged in the years before the Civil War—and also focused on Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. Again, her pictures seem fogged and clouded by oppressive humidity, spindly trees and desolate bogs, flooded in solarized incandescence. Another series of pictures (2006-15) compiles small vernacular African-American churches scattered through the Virginia countryside. The images are shot with Ortho negatives and printed on expired photo paper. They show derelict buildings enshrouded in white flares, as if haunted with the memories of the African Americans who worshipped and socialized there. Mann's talk at Harvard University (Mossey lectures) led to the publication of her memoir *Hold Still* (2015). Even if her parents and brother Chris had supported the Civil Rights movement, the family had taken advantage of a society that sustained the servitude of African Americans—including Mann's beloved nanny, Gee-Gee. Mann had to wrestle with the obliviousness, ignorance, blindness and silence of her family and, consequently, her own complicity. It is with that in mind that she photographed the choreographer Bill T. Jones and other African Americans, all the while aware of the fraught question of her legitimacy in speaking about slavery. *Abide with Me,* begun at the time of Obama's presidency, laments 400 years of intolerance, but is also a way to address oblique acknowledgements and to call for hope.

9 Sarah Kennel then tackles her family pictures between 1985 and 1994. These were shot in an Arcadian setting, in a 400-acre land huddled in a horseshoe bend on the Maury River miles away from town, in a remote summer cabin built by her father and brothers, lacking the modern conveniences, where life seemed prelapsarian, unbound by normative social values. In this rustic space of rocky cliffs, lustrous, glossy, dark water, under the moisture-laden heat and glorious golden light beaming through the dark bush and overhanging foliage, Mann shot the pleasures, perils, and rituals of free-range childhood. Mann steers clear of maudlin pathos, and records these moments of grace with forthright directness.

10 With these pictures, Mann became embroiled in controversy. After the exhibition at the San Diego's Museum of Photographic Arts of 1989, Mann's aptness as a mother was questioned. Her pictures strayed into dangerous territory, shot through with dark undercurrents—the menacing specters of injury, cruelty, incipient sexuality, parental neglect, exposure of her children to voyeurism, and child maltreatment. In 1992, *Aperture* published a selection of 60 works by Mann, which were deemed provocative

and raised conflicted questions about her impetus, the intent and consent. Was she instrumentalizing her children by displaying their intimate experience for her own egotistical artistic purposes? The nudity of her children was found troublesome and offensive. Her unsettling book was sucked into a maelstrom of several national debates and Mann was catapulted into the spotlight, her family unprepared for such public attention.

11 Mann's pictures, taken with an 8 x 10 inch view camera, were in fact staged as much as they were captured, with the cooperation of her children who were involved in the creative process. One of Mann's lines of defense was that critics misunderstood that photography is fictitious, rehearsed, and arranged. However, there is undeniably a non-fictitious dimension in her pictures: the intimacy and trust within the family; the fact that motherhood fueled her creativity; that photographing danger and threat was also a way to ward them off.

12 Another character to appear recurrently in her pictures was Gee-Gee, the indefatigable African-American nanny and domestic employee, who was also a widow with six children that she raised on her own. The various pictures entitled *The Two Virginias*, show the bond between Gee-Gee and her namesake, Mann's own daughter, through mirroring and contrast.

13 Mann had a keen awareness of the transience of things and the passage of time. Her pictures evidence great nostalgia for irretrievable states of grace, the wistful and riveting beauty of those gleaming family moments. Photos are sorrowful acknowledgments of impermanence and ways to pin down fleeting moments. The last series she did of her children were their larger-than-life portraits, and they stress a sense of mutability, with drips, streaks and blurs intimating the treachery of memory which "decays like the rest, is unstable in its essence, flits, occludes, is variable, sidesteps, bleeds away, eludes all recovery." (107) After *Immediate Family*, Mann substituted these "flashes of the finite" by a series of landscapes, "languid tableaux of the durable", the bedrock which forms the basis for the magisterial 2004 *What Remains* exhibition.

14 Drew Gilpin Faust (President and Lincoln Professor of History, Harvard University) focuses on Mann's photographs of the memory of the bloody battlegrounds of the Civil War (Antietam, Cold Harbor, Fredericksburg) and the ghastly scenes of carnage and devastation they left behind, with bodies carpeting the earth. The United States as a nation and as a people owes its existence to this loss and wreckage. *Cold Harbor* took place 140 years before Mann photographed it, and was literally a 19th body farm. Mann felt she was "walking among the accretions of millions of remains". There were no formal procedures for burying the dead, reporting losses, and identifying the deceased. Mass burial pits were improvised, and in 1866 a reburial program was organized, but 46% of corpses remain unidentified. Mann used her 8x10 inch view camera with bellows and hood, and reactivated the wet-plate collodion process used by Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner (Mann felt she was also enacting the belated ceremonial ritual act of homage for the thousands of buried men.

15 Publicized racial crime that occurred during her childhood include Emmett Till's story whose route Mann retraced. Emmett Till was visiting relatives in the Delta in the summer of 1955 when he was abducted by two white men, beaten, shot, tied to a cotton-gin fan, and thrown in the Tallahatchie River. His mutilated corpse was defiantly displayed in an open casket by his grieving mother and that picture acted as a

symbol and catalyst for the civil rights movement. In Mann's photo, the narrow, moldy, stagnant creek where his body was thrown is no less than a quagmire where the viewer is greeted by a ghoulish scrawny hand.

16 The relentless and deep-rooted burden of her homeland's past as well as the quest for atonement via photography is the source of Mann's creativity. It was only late in life that Mann realized that the schools were all white by design and not by happenstance and that she interrogated the social relations of race and class that had shaped her upbringing. Mann was appalled in hindsight about the taken-for-grantedness of the practices of race and subjugation woven into her childhood, such as with her nanny Gee-Gee, whose oppressed condition she had been blind to. Mann was confronted with "the truth of all that [she] had not seen, [she] had not known, [she] had not asked."

17 In a more subjective—and perhaps more piecemeal—vein, the chapter by Hilton Als (*New Yorker* staff writer and recipient of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism) has a literary and political ring to it. She summons the big names of the literary tradition of the South (Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty...) to depict a Southern sense of place, a Southern morbid luminescence that recalls photography itself, the "ties that bind and abide" to the homeland, and the region's "fierce and instructive ghosts" (Flannery O' Connor). Als explains that the colonists were to the British a subordinate species and the former sought to rise above that classification by generating a lower class—that of the slaves—especially as conquest was considered proof of one's favor with God. Als also goes over the coping mechanisms of African Americans, with Jesus's suffering being a source of resilience in order to survive in a world they had not created. Nat Turner's revolt, capture, death, and a century later, the story of Emmett Till were so thickly embedded in Virginian history that Mann's Black nurse, Gee-Gee, erupted with anger when Mann happened to pick up a crippled black hitchhiker. Calling to mind another minority, Als points out that Mann had liberal parents who loved art and words in a region that was not liberal, and therefore was fortunate enough not to be stigmatized for being a woman and an artist.

18 Malcolm Daniel (Gus and Lyndall Wortham Curator of Photography, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) deals with the ancient processes Mann resorted to. After describing her two darkrooms, one spotlessly clean, the other a capharnaum, he expands on the wet collodion process, introduced by British photographer Frederick Scott Archer (1813-1857) in the 1850s. The process was taught to Mann by the Osterman couple. The process served several purposes. Violating the rules in a freewheeling fashion made the creative process more exploratory. Mann's deliberately shoddy technique allows accidents to play a role (with foggy effects, overexposure, stains, streaks and solarization) and puts her subjects at ease. The blemishes, ragged edges and fading vision are reminiscent of negatives unearthed from times past. Mann talked about a "fetishistic ceremony", even though her purpose was to reference the past, not to imitate it, and she was far from the realist rendition her forebears sought. The flaws and blasted effects of the emulsion are likened to wounded bodies, especially as collodion was also used to dress wounds.

19 Her dark and ravaged close-up self-portraits, after a horseback riding incident in 2006, are direct positive images, akin to ambrotypes. Their pitted and scratched skin-like quality mirrors the decay and corrosion of the flesh. In another technique, her *Blackwater* pictures were first shot digitally in color, then tweaked on the computer (collodion is not panchromatic, i.e. not equally sensitive to all colors of the spectrum),

and then photographed anew in the studio as tintypes. Chance elements no longer occurred at the outset here, but at the end of the process.

20 The book shows a good progression of chapters, from the general to the more specific. As in most collective volumes, there is a repetition of ideas and quotes from chapter to chapter, but fortunately, the reader does not grow weary of Mann's enchanting quotes, which evidence her literary talent.

21 Far from the conceptual art trend and from the shift to digital technologies, Mann boldly opted to turn to ancient photo techniques, investigating the potential of ancient equipment, courting the vagaries of chance and their crepuscular effects to develop a contemporary—if anachronistically pictorialist—vision. The metaphorical agency of her techniques, the way her processes lend meaning to her pictures, is compellingly broached in this volume, which is all too infrequent in other art catalogs.

22 Haunted by her roots and inheritance, Mann's photos are steeped in the aching love for her homeland, "its profligate physical beauty". They also grapple with a lingering sense of shame and accountability for its scarred and troubled history. Mann not only hopes to come to terms with the predicament of her homeland—at once a sanctuary, a battleground and a graveyard—but also to gain deeper insight into herself through her effulgent and elusive art, infused with a sense of poignant oneirism. This intensely personal and idiosyncratic journey into what nourished and shaped her from her earliest age is given universal and transcendent resonance through the fundamental themes it addresses and its value as a *memento mori*—both an "ode and requiem" (Faustine Rodin). As an in-depth and comprehensive synthesis of her photographic work that spans over four decades, this retrospective catalog is very welcome for the scholarly and critical attention it brings to the full range of Mann's nebulous, refulgent and magnetic art.

NOTES

1. It is preceded only by the less detailed catalog of her 2010 exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

2. See below for details of this controversy.

INDEX

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Mots-clés : photographie, pictorialisme, collodion, droits civiques, Georgie, Virginie, Antietam, Cold Harbor, esclavage, famille, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, guerre de Sécession

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